

Reaper Man

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Summary: Noble Team fight through a district of Quezon in their hunt for an Insurrection agent. One-shot, rated M for some strong language and strong, bloody violence.

Reaper Man

Written because a) I need to break through a bad case of writer's block and b) I want something nice and cathartic to distract me from the fact that I'm currently too poor to buy Halo 4.

Reaper Man

"You look nervous, Mr Glover."

"Nervous? Nah, I ain't scared, spook."

"You aren't? As a piece of friendly advice, I'd say that you should be, you know."

"You ain't gonna intimidate me, spook. I'm not saying a word."

"Oh, really? And why is that?"

"Because I know that my brothers in the Insurrection are gonna get to this little base of yours any day now, crack it open and bust me out of here. And any amount of torture in the meantime ain't gonna make me talk."

"I see. Do you think, by any chance, that we're on Reach at the moment?"

"Sure, why not? Where the hell else you gonna take me?"

"A ship, perhaps. Orbit, maybe. Far, far out of the reach of your Insurrection friends."

"Ahuh. I still ain't betraying them, pal. And sooner or later, they'll bust me out, wherever you stick me. I'm big hero for them, man, you know that. Why else would you have got me?"

"You're nothing more than a criminal with the ability to justify your actions to yourself, Mr Glover, but I will admit that you do have some useful information. I must say, however, that your confidence in your friends' ability to break you out of your current predicament is grossly misplaced."

"Oh yeah? Why's that, pal?"

"Do you remember the people who brought you here?"

For the first point in the conversation, this got no reply.

"Ah, I thought so. Now, if I remember correctly, when you were brought in, you were only semi-conscious at the time and in state of considerable shock. As you were coming to, it is reported that you were mumbling semi-coherently about a 'skull man'."

Again, silence.

"We're getting somewhere now, aren't we? Now, you have two options; you talk to me, or you don't and your life becomes even more difficult and miserable than it is right now. Because he's on board, right now."

"You're bullshitting me, spook."

"On the contrary, I'm telling nothing but the truth. I can send him in, if you want."

"No! I mean, no, no, that ain't needed."

"So you'll talk."

"If you don't bring that skull guy in here thenâ€¦yeah. Yeah, I'll talk."

"I understand that he'll be disappointed to hear that. He's a man who enjoys a good conversation."

"Man? That thing ain't no man. I don't know what he was, but what he did down thereâ€¦no human being could do that."

"I see. You know, in my eagerness to question you, I've yet to read Commander A259's report. Seeing as we are here, and as you are suddenly so keen to talk, why don't we start at the top?"

"And if I do, he doesn't get called in?"

"Correct."

"Alright then. I'll go from the top."

\_Reach, Quezon, 3rd June 2552\_

"This place is a goddamn shithole."

As crude as Emile's assessment of the terrain was, it was accurate. Quezon's District 34, a tightly packed urban environment built to house the workforce of the city's massive factories and shipbuilding efforts, was not a kind place. Rusted, prefab metal buildings jammed against one another and fighting for space. Smashed windows formed gaping wounds in the structures' sides, litter skittered across roadways. It was an unimpressive sight to greet Noble Team with as they stepped out of the anonymous, unnoticeable ONI van that had carried them there.

"You can say that again," Kat remarked, surveying the derelict street. Its only inhabitants were a gang of teenagers in hoodies; they glanced back in their direction and then looked away again, deciding that the new arrivals weren't worth their time. "Typical boom-and-bust urban sob story, this place; blooms from the foundries and steelworks, then they go and the money leaves with them."

"No wonder the Innies make so many friends here," Jun said.

"The hell's that supposed to mean?" Emile asked, glaring across the street. Out of all of Noble Team, he looked the most uncomfortable out of his MJOLNIR armour, clad as he was in civvy gear in order to be less noticeable.

"No jobs, no money, crime in abundance," Jun said. "People here are desperate; they'll follow anyone who promises them cash and a way out."

"We'll teach 'em to think the right way," Emile said.

"I'm sure we will, Emile," Carter said. "Everyone armed?"

The pistols they had tucked away, hidden in the inner pockets of the jackets they wore, were checked, and the SPARTANs nodded. The only other weapon there was Emile's heavy, curved kukri, tucked into a leather sheath on his belt.

"Good," the leader of Noble Team said. "Right, we've hung around here too long; let's split. We meet at the rendezvous and armour up there."

They nodded, and moved. Jorge, Kat and Carter went one way along the derelict street, Jun and Emile along the other. Noble Team's sniper and pointman cut into an alleyway, following the route given to them on their briefing. Jun glanced around as they navigated around overflowing dumpsters, litter and a puddle of what he hoped was rainwater.

"You look nervous," Emile observed.

"This is one the most dangerous neighbourhoods on the planet, and Innies territory to boot," Jun said. "I'd rather face them with my nice, cosy suit of MJOLNIR armour between me and some bullets."

"And that's why I said we should've just gone in with full armour anyway," Emile replied. "Hate stepping into enemy territory with just a pistol and my knife."

"Carter's got a point, though," Jun said. "The Innies here'll just jump ship as soon as they get a sniff of SPARTANs, and we'll never

get a chance to get close to them. Armouring up at the rendezvous improves our odds of getting too close for them to cut and run, doesn't it?"

"Huh, guess so," Emile conceded. He reached the mouth of the alleyway, glancing left and right.

"Anything?" Jun asked.

"Gang of hoods at the end of the street," Emile said. "All got the same haircut; probably some kind of gang sign."

"Same lot who we saw on the block over?" Jun asked. "I don't want to be tailed."

"Nah, they're a different group," Emile replied. "We should be good."

"Unless they decide we're a good target for a mugging," Jun remarked as they stepped out onto the street.

"Then we get to have a little fun," Emile replied.

"Our orders were to keep it quiet," Jun said as they crossed to the other side of the road. "We don't want to bring a gang down on our heads because you decided to pick a fight."

"Relax," Emile said. "Don't worry, it'll be fine."

"You really need to learn the value of discretion, Emile," Jun remarked with a shake of his head.

"Managed just fine without it so far."

"And what the word hubris means."

They rounded a corner, onto another road inhabited by rusted metal buildings. Passing by a liquor store, shutters drawn over its front windows and the only sign of it being open the unlocked door, Jun glanced back round at the corner.

"Doesn't look like those guys are following us," he said.

"You're getting paranoid, Jun," Emile said, kicking an empty can away. "We'll be fine."

They continued on their way, taking the route they had planned, cutting through alleyways and doubling back on themselves several times to throw any would-be tails. There were few people about, and those that weren't just hoodies passed them by as swiftly as possible without making eye contact, aside from the occasional prostitute whose solicitations were ignored. Any gangers just let them pass by; even without their MJOLNIR armour, Jun and Emile were big men, and the air of barely-contained violence that crackled around Emile was enough to convince them that there would be easier prey elsewhere. It was when they cut through a back alley between an empty grocer's shop and a block of flats that they ran into trouble.

Four figures stepped into its mouth, weapons in their hands and predatory grins on their faces. A glance behind them showed three

more at the other end, trapping the two SPARTANs between the buildings. Both of them made an assessment of the group; primarily armed with improvised melee weapons, steel bars, chains and knives, with three firearms between them, all of them defunct UNSC pistols of varying makes, including an antique Muramasa Armouries RRSP.45 Revolver held in the hands of the one in the front. All of them were large, muscled, probably from steroid usage, and likely boosted by illegal strength and reaction enhancers common among underground pitfighters. Jun and Emile had two pistols and a kukri between them, along with chemical augmentations of Project CRYSANTHEUM and two decades of training and battlefield experience.

Jun almost felt sorry for them.

The one with the revolver stepped forwards, a lazy, predatory grin cutting across his features. Jun glanced down at the way he held the weapon; his hold was one-handed, a bad call when using a weapon with recoil as ferocious as the RRSP.45. Without both hands securing it, the shots would go wide.

"Well what do we have here?" he asked, using the weapon's trigger guard to spin it around his index finger. "Looks like a couple of customers who need to pay the toll. Ain't that right, boys?"

That got a chuckle from the band of thugs at his back.

"Toll?" Jun asked. "Toll for what?"

"For crossing through our territory," the ganger said. "Everyone's gotta pay it, pal."

"And if we don't?" Emile said.

"Then we kill you and take your stuff," the ganger said. "Hand over any cash and valuables, and maybe we'll let you go."

"Believe me," one of the thugs behind them said. "It's better to do it the easy way."

"I've got an alternative suggestion," Emile said, stepping forward. "You back the fuck off, now, and I don't kill you and all your little friends."

The thug laughed at that, before he said; "You crazy or something? It's seven on two, man, no way you can even touch us. I'll take my chances."

Jun saw Emile smile, and the mirth within that expression was terrifying.

"Think these guys might not be messing about, boss," one of them, equipped with a stronger survival instinct than his leader, said as he took a step back.

"Quit being a fuckin' pussy, Danny," the leader said. He turned back to Emile. "Alright, tough guy, bring it o-"

The heavy blade of Emile's kukri slammed into his throat, blood and chunks of cartilage spraying from the wound and obscuring the graffiti scrawled on the walls. The force of the blow spun the thug

around, and the SPARTAN grabbed the wrist holding his revolver as it turned towards him. He wrenched the weapon from limp hands, and fired three times. Thudding barks echoing through the alleyway as the slugs ripped through the throats and heads of the three goons that had backed up their leader, painting conical sprays of viscera on the pavement behind them.

Jun spun at the moment Emile struck the first blow, drawing his pistol from its concealed holster. It cracked in his hand, each shot drilling through the forehead of the enemies at the other end of the alley, and a moment later the echoes faded, the bodies slumping to the ground. The entire fight had taken less than three seconds.

"I like this gun," Emile said, holding his new acquisition up to inspect it. "Got a nice kick to it."

"Then keep hold of it," Jun replied. He flicked his pistol's safety on and slid it back into its hiding place. "Come on, we should get going before anybody shows up to investigate those gunshots."

"In this neighbourhood?" Emile asked, crouching down next to the thug's body and rifling through his pockets for any ammo. "Not likely. Besides, if they do, I don't mind giving them a nice warm reception."

"Too bad for you that we can't afford to waste any more time," Jun replied as Emile pulled out a jingling pouch. He headed forwards, stepping over the body of another of the gangers, taking care not to tread in the splatter of blood that had been painted over the pavement. "Come on; unless they've had a holdup like ours the others will be waiting."

The street they stepped into was deserted apart from a kid, one who couldn't have been more than seven years old, cowering in the doorway of a block of flats with a ball in his hands. He stared at the two SPARTANS as they walked by.

"Get lost," Emile growled. Obediently, he ducked the building.

"You've got a real warm and friendly way with people, you know," Jun said.

"Whatever, Jun."

"Noble Three and Four, this is Noble One," Carter's voice crackled into the radio buds in their ears. "Do you copy?"

"Loud and clear, Noble One," Jun replied.

"We're at the rendezvous now," Carter said. "Where are you?"

"Nearly there. Met some trouble along the way."

"Get here asap," Carter replied.

"Acknowledged," Jun said. He flicked the radio bead off and glanced at Emile. "Looks like we're going to need to get out of here quickly anyway."

"Fine," Emile said as they picked up the pace. They glanced along the street a few more times; they were on the borders of territory controlled by what might be an insurrection cell, and if their cover was blown then they'd have an armed gang down on their heads in moments. They were lucky, making their way through the quiet streets undisturbed, and came to their destination; a huge, abandoned warehouse, nothing more than a box of pitted concrete with a right-angled triangle of corrugated iron for a roof. One of the massive metal doors, scarred with rust, was partly pulled open, and they stepped through.

"Over here," a voice hissed, and the two of them glanced over to see Jorge standing in the lee of the doorway. "MJOLNIR and weapons are in the duffel bags in the corner."

Emile nodded, pulling off the shirt and jacket he wore. Beneath it he was already wearing the rubberised undersuit of his MJOLNIR armour. As they approached, Carter was busy fixing the breastplate of his own powered exoskeleton on, taken from the duffel bags that had been left for them as part of an ONI drop for their operation. Their goal, to ascertain the whereabouts of the Insurrection agent Eliza Ingrid through the capture and interrogation of the local cell's leader, would be much easier now that they had the formidable force multiplier that was their armour.

"Where's Kat?" Jun asked.

"Keeping watch on the roof," Carter said. "Now, you two need reminding of the objectives?"

"Bust into their main base of operations, grab their leader for interrogation as to where they hid their friend," Jun said. "I know the drill."

"Good," Carter said. "And that means we need to take him alive."

The last comment was aimed at Emile, who was zipping open the duffel bag containing his equipment.

"Listen, Carter," Emile said. "The stunt that bitch pulled when she escaped that base has got me wanting to bring her in more than anyone; I don't appreciate anybody trying to kill me, and I'm gonna haul her in kicking and screaming if it kills me."

"So you'll make sure you bring Glover in alive?" Carter checked.

Emile pulled his shotgun from the bag holding it and grinned at his commander.

"Damn straight I will," he replied. "After all, he knows where our mutual friend is."

They donned their armour, the components of the MJOLNIR clamping into place around their limbs and torsos. Emile paused for a moment as he pulled out his bulbous EVA helmet from the duffel; the reflection of his face was obscured in the skull he had recently carved into its shining orange surface, and he slid it on. The ambush that their quarry had arranged for him outside the base that Noble Team had

brought her to had been what had scratched it in the first place. The scratches were the result of a few rounds from the insurrection agents' stolen Warthog glancing off the visor. His kukri had done the rest of the work, the skull that now decorated it leering from the visor to bring terror to the enemies of the UNSC.

"Jorge, we're good," Carter called across. "Jun, keep an eye on the door while Jorge armours up."

"On it," came the reply, the sniper slipping into the shadowy corner Jorge had occupied, where he might get the best view of any potential intruders. Jorge retreated to the corner where his equipment was stowed, the colossal SPARTAN going through the complex process of preparing the modular components of his MJOLNIR armour with ease; he'd had more than enough years of warfare to practice in. As he was loading the chain of rounds into his machine gun, he glanced over at Emile.

"Where'd you get that gun from?" he asked, noticing Noble Four's newest acquisition.

"Some hoods who tried to jump me and Jun," Emile replied, drumming his fingers on the butt of the revolver.

"I'm amazed they managed to get a piece like that," Jorge said. "You should keep hold of that thing; it's an antique, and probably pretty valuable to the right person. Was being made redundant when \_I\_ was a kid."

"Ahuh?" Emile said. "So they used these pistols to hunt dinosaurs, then?"

"Hah; you should do standup, Emile," Jorge said with a shake of his head.

"Jorge!" Carter called over. "You ready?"

"Just finished," Jorge replied, sliding his helmet on.

"Good," Carter said. He flicked the radio bead on. "Kat, get down here, we're moving."

His second in command was down in moments, boots of her blue MJOLNIR armour clanking against the metal steps that she descended.

"Streets are quiet, Commander," she said as she reached the bottom. "As far as I could tell, only people about seem to be civvies, though they could be sentries."

"Anybody armed?" Carter asked.

"Not that I could see," Kat said.

"Good," Carter said. "Alright, Noble Team, let's move."

Emile took point, barrel of his shotgun sweeping across the street that stretched either side of the warehouse's back entrance. He called an all clear as he spotted the corner that they wanted, and Noble Team followed behind him. The SPARTANs formed a staggered file, three on one side of the road, three on the other, alternating



between each side of the road. Like turrets, the barrels of their weapons panned across the street, scanning for any potential hostiles lurking in the windows and doorways. Just a few blocks from their target, there were a thousand places to hide in this street alone, and every nook and cranny might conceal a threat.

Emile came to a halt at the end of the street, pressing up against the side of a building and peering around. The skull on his helmet looked back at the rest of Noble Team a moment later.

"We've got hostiles," he said. "Gang of muscle in the street, nine or ten of them, thirty five metres down from here. Look pretty well armed, got themselves a mixture of assault rifles and DMRs out there, maybe grenades too."

"You think they might be insurrection?" Carter asked.

"Can't say for sure," Emile said. "But I'd bet good credits that they are."

"Either way, we're going to need to take them out," Noble Team's leader said. "If they raise an alarm then we could have the cell coming down on our heads."

"That doesn't sound so bad to me," Emile replied.

"Jun," Carter said. "Get to the other side of the street, find a position with a good field of view. Jorge, hang back and provide suppressive fire. Emile, Kat, you're with me."

Jun went first, darting across the roadway and into cover behind a car. He peered out, and a moment later the squad's radio crackled into life; "Got a good view here. Tell me when you want me to start shooting."

"Hold off for now," Carter replied. "Jorge, get to position. Noble Team, let's move."

Jorge nodded, the giant hefting his machine gun in readiness to step round the corner. The three remaining SPARTANs stepped out into the middle of the road, to where their enemies were. Emile's report had been accurate, about a fireteam's worth of them, clustered around a few cars barked across the road, next to a radio blaring Ghetdub. Smoke from a few cigarettes was wafting into there, and weapons, proper ones that were a step up from the pistols and knives gangsters usually armed themselves with, were in reach. Normally it was strange that they would flaunt such firepower so flagrantly, but the police never came to this part of town and a turf war had flared up as of late, so for the Insurrection cell here it was more important to make sure borders were enforced than be discreet.

The three SPARTANs, for a few moments, at least, went unnoticed as they moved down the street. Then one of the gangers glanced up from where was sitting. For a moment he froze, before he realised what he was seeing before and yelled out; "Holy shit! They've got the goddamn freaks onto us!"

"Lay down rounds!" Carter ordered across the radio, dashing forwards to cover as the enemy scrambled to respond. A deep crack echoed along the street as Jun's sniper fired, the heavy round ripping a man's arm

from his shoulder and flipping him around as he fell. Jorge's machine gun chattered into life, bullets spraying across the street. An enemy combatant fell to a burst from Kat, and another reeled away, clutching a bleeding throat as Carter squeezed the trigger of his DMR. The enemy finally managed to rally, ducking into cover and sending rounds back down range when they could, but their fire was sporadic and more than one was cut down by Noble Team as they tried.

"We've got a runner with a flare, going for help!" Jun warned. His rifle cracked. "Shit! Missed him."

"Emile," Carter called across the radio. "Get after him!"

"My pleasure," the SPARTAN replied. From his place behind a car, he rose, vaulting onto its boot with his shotgun in hand. A single stride brought him onto the roof, the metal crunching and bending under his weight, a second buckling the bonnet and a third bringing him onto the street. His shotgun was up, a blast sending a cone of buckshot into an enemy combatant's chest and knocking him back. One hand held its pump-action grip and racked it, the other drawing his revolver and firing a brace of shots into another ganger that tried to shoot him. It went back down to his thigh and the grip of his weapon was into the hand once more.

He broke into the enemy position, his shotgun booming as it eviscerated another enemy, and in a dead sprint he was past them, dropping a grenade on his way as a parting gift. Ignoring the few panicked, baffled rounds that sparked around the roadway at his feet, he rounded the corner where the enemy runner had fled, in time to see his quarry disappear into an alley.

At speed a no normal human being could to match, he followed, a few steps getting him to its mouth. It was a short route between buildings, his prey already running to the left from the exit, and the same course was taken by Emile. He rounded the corner in time to see the door of an apartment building swing shut and he booted it open, the metal and plastic door spinning and bouncing away under the force of the blow.

There was a greeting party waiting for him on the other side, three of his game's allies. One of them was crushed by the door as Emile sent it flying, and the second swung at him with a lead pipe. Emile grabbed it, obliterating the wielder's midriff with a point-blank blast from his shotgun held in his free hand, spinning and hurling the body into the third interloper. He was staggered but did not fall, but Emile's kukri slid free from its sheath to bury itself in the side of his neck a moment later.

He didn't waste any time, electing to stow his shotgun on his back and draw his revolver with his free hand, bloodied blade and pistol held ready as he hurried up the stairwell. He took them two at a time, delighting in the sound of the panicked clatter of his prey's footsteps as he tried to evade the superhuman predator who was fast catching up. As he reached a landing, a door onto it swung open and a woman emerged. Her eyes widened in shock and terror as she saw the skull-helmed giant there, an apparition of nightmare holding a pistol and a blade, and she slammed it shut once more with a shriek of terror. That gave only Emile a moment's pause before he ignored the interruption and carried on up.

A few more flights and he exploded through a doorway at the top onto a rooftop. His target, a young man who couldn't have been more than twenty, saw him and swore as he fumbled with the long tube of the pull-flare he carried. A split second later and Emile had closed the distance between them, grabbing both his hands and pulling them apart before it could be fired. Before Emile's quarry knew what was happening, he was slammed against the ground, knocking his head on the floor. He whimpered as he looked up at the forbidding, terrifying figure of Emile standing over him, the SPARTAN now holding the flare in his hands. He didn't try to rise.

"Your orders were to get up high and pull this flare, weren't they?" the augmented nightmare asked. His answer was a mute, terrified nod. "And you were gonna obey them, weren't you?"

Unsure as to where the conversation was going, he received another nod.

"You generally think you're good at following orders?"

A nod.

"Alright. Well, you know what, kid? As a favour to you, I'll make sure your last one doesn't go unfilled."

Mouth of the flare pointed at his victim, Emile pulled the ignition cord. There was screaming and thrashing as reflected flames danced around the carved skull, but not for long.

"Noble One, this is Noble Four," Emile said as he stepped away from the still smoking corpse and back onto the stairwell. "I've dealt with the runner and I'm heading back down to street level now."

"Understood, Noble Four," Carter's voice replied. "Good work."

Emile met the rest of Noble Team back on street level. The grille around the barrel of Jorge's machine gun was stained charcoal from carbon discharge as it fired, and there was a long, straight scratch in the paint of Kat's armour from a lucky hit.

"Back on point, Noble Four," Carter said, and Emile nodded as he moved onto the pavement. The SPARTAN team's progress was swift and merciless, any enemies they found being dealt with by a quick and ruthlessly thorough hail of gunfire. As they pressed onwards, however, the worrying doubled-edged sword of their rapid progress began to hang over them all the closer; they were getting closer to their target, but once the alert was raised the enemy would be able to marshal their forces with ease and bring them down on Noble Team's heads in no time.

Finally, the SPARTAN team's luck ran out. One of the enemy, a member of a particularly large group Noble Team had been forced to engage, slipped free from the fight unnoticed, and a few moments later a green flare rose skywards, trailing smoke from the burning projectile. Emile watched it rise, the bright light that shone from it reflected in the surface of his helmet, and he smiled.

The objective now was simple; maintain momentum and reach the enemy's

base of operations in order to acquire their target. They had at best a few more minutes of unimpeded movement before the enemy really began to slow them down, and perhaps a minute more before their opponents realised they were fighting SPARTANS and not a rival gang.

Noble Team moved at a dead run, all concerns for subtlety and keeping a low profile forgotten. The first group of alerted hostiles they met, a band of five, were not so much met as ran directly into; it was five unarmoured men being hit by five fully-armoured SPARTANS, and the augmented humans battered them aside with barely an afterthought. The ones that did not die from the immediate impact died only a few minutes later from the crushed bones and ruptured organs.

The next group gave them a little more pause for thought; they had time and space as they spotted the SPARTANS, and a hail of gunfire forced them into cover. Jorge stayed in the open for a few moments, standing his ground and squeezing the trigger of his machine gun, heedless of the bullets sparking off his shields. That was enough to force the enemy's head down, and Emile took the opening he saw. He moved at a dead sprint down the side of road, along the pavement where old cars that had been stripped down for parts provided cover. The enemy, in their haste, had assembled in the centre of the road, and now Emile was going to punish them for that.

He hit their flank and he was not merciful. The first two died as blasts from his shotgun tore them apart. The third and fourth had their foreheads ripped out by revolver slugs. Insurrectionists five and six were disembowelled by Emile's kukri and were left to die slowly and clutching their guts. The last one was hit by three strikes from the SPARTAN's fists; he died during the second blow, one that reduced his ribs to a paste of shattered bone and pulverised flesh.

Without any orders, Emile lead Noble Team's advance, the close quarters of the streets, his shotgun and his propensity for short-ranged violence crowning him king of the battlefield. The enemy were no trained force, nothing more than street thugs with a cause, and they hit Noble Team in disorganised waves, drawn by the flare and the sounds of combat. Most other cells would have been better organised than this, but then again most other cells were militia instead of gangers with a revolutionary sentiment.

Despite the fact that they were pleased by their swift progress, the members of Noble Team were puzzled; the enemy were coming at them in dribs and drabs, even though civilian communications such as mobile phones would have been enough to marshal an effective, organised response.

It was they were getting close that they finally found what the militia's leader had been planning. Emile burst onto a T-junction, gunning down a ganger with a round from his latest acquisition, and in the next moment a hail of gunfire hammered towards him. He cursed, shields crackling and sparking as they tried to protect him from the barrage of projectiles, sprinting to cover on the far side of the street as they finally died. A bullet zipped between the plates of his armour into his midriff as he vaulted a car, and he cursed as shots hammered into the vehicle.

He waited a few moments for his shields to recharge and risked a glance out even as more enemy rounds slammed into the cover he had taken. Before him was, for all intents and purposes, a fortress; a multi-storey block of flats with windows and doorways bristling with armed gangers. The buildings were arranged in a 'C' shape around a central courtyard, that forum and the road leaving an open space of dead ground between himself and the building.

"Noble One, this is Noble Four; I've found their HQ!" Emile called into the radio as he ducked back down. "There's a whole goddamn army here and they've got me pinned. Need assistance."

A stray round managed to punch through the shell of the car and zip past his helmet, and he cursed.

"Copy that, Noble Four," Carter's voice replied. "We're moving to cover you now."

A cylindrical canister bounced and skittered on the roadway, and smoke bloomed from its top, an opaque wall of thick white fog drooling into the air. The punishing salvos of fire that had kept Emile's head down began to slacken as their target was obscured and the rounds fell wide of their mark.

Jorge stepped into view, the giant's machine gun held ready, and hidden as he was behind the cloud thrown up by the smoke grenade, he pointed it in the enemy's direction and opened fire. A wall of rounds roared from the weapon as he fired blind, sheer volume of fire compensating for accuracy, and there were screams of alarm and pain as they began to hit home.

A figure darted behind Emile, and he saw Jun nip past him and into the doorway of the apartment block opposite, the sniper not even sparing the time to nod his comrade a greeting. With the enemy's head down Emile moved, sprinting around the car to the tip of the C furthest away from the rest of Noble Team. A few shots chipped the concrete around his feet as he burst through the smoke, but he was out of the firers' field of view a moment later and slammed his back against the concrete wall of the apartment building.

He shuffled away from the central courtyard that the enemy was trying to use as a kill zone and looked around the corner. The street there was unguarded and unmanned, the enemy forgetting it in their enthusiasm to try and pin down Noble Team in the centre of the apartment building. As he stepped out into the street, seeing a doorway that would allow him entry, he reflected that no professional force would let such a thing happen; he would gladly teach them the error of their ways.

"Noble One, this is Noble Four," Emile said into the radio. "I've found a back door into the enemy base of operations; you want me to flank them?"

"Negative, Noble Four," Carter's voice crackled back. "You're too far ahead of the rest of us as it is; hold position and wait for-"

Emile flicked the radio off. Technical difficulties could be a bitch, sometimes.

He booted down the door, the thick lock on it no match for the force

in the blow and stepped into the corridor, currently empty. He rounded a corner into another corridor, coming face to face with a pair of gangers who cursed in alarm as they saw him. Two squeezes of his shotgun's trigger left them as nothing more than broken corpses to be stepped over.

His progress through the apartment building was swift and savage as he cut through it towards the central stairwell. Anything that got in his way died, and died quickly; he was less a warrior than he was a force of nature, an avatar of warfare that slaughtered anything in his path. His armour was spattered with blood, gauntlets and wrists covered in a coat of slick crimson gore from where he had rimmed both fists through the ribcage of an enemy.

By the time he had reached his destination, the bottom of the stairs that would bring him up to the enemy's leader, he had killed fourteen men with either his shotgun, his revolver, his blade or his bare hands.

There were shouts filtering down from above as the gangers began to react to his presence. Emile broke open his revolver, the empty shells it had been loaded with chiming like miniature bells as they hit the floor, and swiftly inserted his final load of six rounds. He closed it again, drawing his kukri with his left hand, and moved, charging up the stairs at a dead sprint. Tiles cracked beneath the impact of his boots, throwing up dust and ceramic chips, and he rounded the corner in the stairs. Above him, coming from the landing, a ganger appeared with a sawn-off shotgun in his hand. His temple bloomed into a rose of viscera as Emile fired, a single bounding stride carrying him up the stairs. The next one brought him to the top, where three more enemy fighters were waiting. With an animalistic grin, the SPARTAN tore into them, hacking and stabbing and leaving the bodies behind him to bleed as he sprinted up the next flight of stairs.

He was in his element, all but panting with rabid, savage glee as he slaughtered his way upwards, every cell of his body bathing in a sea of raw adrenaline. The bullet wound he had sustained earlier was forgotten as he forged upwards, slaughtering anything that got in his way. Behind him, the enemy rallied and surged after him, but he was uncaring for the problem. His only goal was to get to their leader.

Two floors from the top, however, and he met an obstruction. On the landing of the penultimate storey, behind a barricade of furniture the militia had mounted an M-41 LAAG, the weapon taken from the back of a Warthog and probably bought for a small fortune on the black market. Emile's only warning was the whining of its barrel before a wall of rounds tore towards him. His shields beeped and wailed as they were worn down, and he rolled back the way he came as the brick and concrete wall behind him disintegrated. A grenade was thrown down after him, bouncing off the far wall and towards him, an overeager pet following an unloving master. Emile barely managed to throw himself out of the way as it exploded, rolling through a doorway into a corridor, landing in a crouch. The blast and whickering shrapnel it sent after him was enough to knock his shields down to zero and he felt a stray shard bite into the soft joint of his armour at the elbow.

When he looked up, he was face to face with a rifle barrel.

He managed to throw himself out of its way as the trigger was pulled, gracelessly slamming through a door and into somebody's home, past a short corridor with a bathroom leading off it and into the main living area. The burst of fire was cut short and the ganger, along with three of his comrades, swept around the doorframe, their weapons held ready.

Emile's shotgun boomed and reduced the skull of one to gory paste, but the other two opened fire, hosing down the room with a spray of bullets. One of them ricocheted off Emile's shoulder pad, burying itself in the far wall, and the SPARTAN ducked behind the corner. Stowing pistol and kukri, he pulled a grenade from the webbing over his armour, flicked the pin and after a moment to let it cook, rolled it out around the corner. There was cursing and a thump, and he burst forth back into the corridor.

A ganger was waiting for him, a DMR in hand, and as Emile's shields began to restore he grabbed the barrel with his free hand, wrenched it from his enemy's grip and slammed its stock into the man's skull, snapping his neck. The weapon was abandoned as Emile glanced over his shoulder, in time for his shields, now halfway through restoring, to catch a spray of rounds from a pistol. Emile drew his shotgun one-handed and fired, ripping the left arm and the side of his enemy's torso from his body.

A glance back the other way showed another knot of gangers pressing forwards and his free hand loosed the revolver. Three heavy, barking shots had them bleeding and dying, and he glanced back the way he came as more enemy pushed towards him from the corridor. In the cramped confines, most of them couldn't fire their weapons safely without hitting their comrades in the back, but rounds were spraying towards him from both directions and he had no room to manoeuvre or dodge; his shields were wearing down slowly and were unable to recharge from the glancing hits and lucky shots that kept zipping against them. If they died, his MJOLNIR would could withstand some punishment, but not for long.

His revolver barked as it fired its final three shots one way, and his shotgun vomited out its final gouts of lead along the other. There was no time to reload the shells, and he stowed it on his back and drew his kukri, flipping his revolver around to hold it by the barrel. With a scream of primal fury, he charged along the corridor.

The enemy were sent reeling for a moment as Emile stabbed with his blade or used the grip of his pistol like a cudgel. The bodies of the first few gangers were swept aside, but his kukri jarred between the ribs of one of his victims and the weight of the body slowed him and dragged him down. That was enough for a salvo of bullets from the ganger in front of Emile to slam into his shields, and when the blade was wrenched free in a spray of bone fragments and gore, burying itself in that man's throat, a ganger behind him smashed the butt of his combat rifle into the back of Emile's helmet.

The SPARTAN reeled back with a yell of pain, and a mob descended upon him. Even with his superhuman strength, his armour and his reflexes, the sheer number of enemies, the raw mass of furious, panicked humanity pressing over him was overwhelming, robbing him of any room to manoeuvre. His revolver was lost somewhere in the struggle, and he

kicked and punched, stabbed and hacked, cursing even as he was bowled over onto the floor, fists and weapon stocks pounding against his form. The burning hot pain of a knife stabbed between the joints of his armour in his gut, he felt a lance of agony as a point blank shot tore through his left thigh.

His response was a roar, the sound so loud, so furious, so very primal in its nature that for a moment the mob that filled the corridor froze. In the next moment, Emile rose.

In after-action reports filed by Commander Carter-A259, the leader of Noble Team had remarked that there were times during when Warrant Officer First Class Emile A-239 was known to lose all focus, fire discipline and care for any objectives the team were pursuing. He would fall into a berserker rage, in a similar manner to the Brutes of the Covenant, taking the fight to the enemy with his kukri and bare hands. At times, it could be a boon as he slaughtered the enemy with a terrifying strength and no care for injury, and at others a hindrance as Emile rushed into the fight and forced the rest of Noble Team to cover his advance. Carter had logged it as a serious issue to be addressed, and had put Emile on punishment detail for such episodes more than once. Those lessons were never quite taken to heart.

Roaring and bellowing like an enraged predator, Emile's world descended into a crimson mist of hacking, stabbing and punching. The sensation of slick gore against his armour, the reverberating din of screaming in his ears, the sickening stench of soiled clothes and ripped guts seeping through his helmet's filters. At some point, he was vaguely aware of climbing some stairs, using a corpse as a shield from the bullets of a mounted weapon. Bursting past that barricade, bludgeoning and stabbing. And finally, a face he recognised from briefings. The one remaining spark of sanity in Emile's rage-blasted mind stayed his hand so that his grip locked around the throat of Daniel Glover, and the other hand, shaking with the adrenaline rush that surged through it, wiped the blood-soaked blade of the kukri on his shirt and returned it to its sheath. His free gauntlet wiped across the surface of his EVA helmet, removing the layer of viscera, pulverised bone and splattered brain matter that coated and revealing the skull beneath. His voice was the grating snarl of a choked engine.

"We have some questions to ask you."

"You're shaking, you know."

"S-so what if I am."

"Just an observation, really. So, that was how you were hauled in. His disrespect of battlefield discipline aside, Warrant Officer A-239 did a remarkably thorough job, you must agree. Perhaps excessively thorough."

"Yeah, you can say that."

"Indeed. No, Mr Grover, onto the most important question of this little interview; where, might I ask, is Eliza Ingrid?"

End



file.